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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 003852

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SUBJECT: METHODOICAL PROGRESS IN MINDANAO PEACE TALKS

REF: A. MANILA 3728 (MINDANAO PEACE PROCESS MOVES FORWARD)

- [1](#)B. MANILA 3676 (INSURGENT CHAIRMAN
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OFFER)

Classified By: Ambassdor Kristie A. Kenney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The government continues to ake important progress in peace talks with Muslis on Mindanao, according to government officialsclose to the twin negotiation tracks.

In recentdiscussions with the DCM, chief government negotiator Rodolfo Garcia expressed strong optimism that he government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Frnt (MILF) would sign a formal deal in January onterritory and resource-sharing for an enlarged Mslim political entity in Mindanao, and triggeringmore serious negotiations on difficult governanc and security issues. Separately, his predecessr, Silvestre Afable, echoed these views, and sugested that progress in oft-delayed peace implementation talks with the other main Muslim group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), was also evident. Both officials noted the importance of intensified government and international efforts to ramp up support for the two agreements among local politicians, the business community and the broader populace in Mindanao. End summary.

#### Territorial Deal Likely In January

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[1](#)2. (C) In a November 23 meeting with the DCM and PolCouns, the government's chief peace negotiator Rodolfo Garcia said that he and his counterparts from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) had come to terms on all key territorial and resource-sharing issues at their informal talks in Kuala Lumpur November 14-15. He expressed pleasant surprise that agreement had been reached so quickly, and said that he expected to hammer out a formal text detailing the agreement at the next round of discussions, now slated for December 14-15. A signing ceremony on the new territories to be included in an enlarged Muslim political entity (reftel A) could take place in early January, Garcia said.

#### Broader Peace Deal By Summer?

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[1](#)3. (C) Garcia acknowledged that the more difficult issues of governance and security still lay ahead of the negotiators. He stressed that these were "sensitive" topics and that the two sides had consciously put them off to the side while working on the territorial and resource concerns. While appearing confident that the two sides would eventually reach

agreement on these key points -- and perhaps even before summer -- Garcia acknowledged he did not have a clear vision of where the two sides would end up. While some on the government side were clearly thinking of demobilization and disarmament of the MILF insurgents, some on the Muslim side were positing a transformation of the insurgent forces into a regional police or security for the new Muslim political entity envisioned in the territorial agreement. The give-and-take of negotiation would likely produce a compromise that both sides could live with.

14. (C) The Muslim insurgents faced issues of both pride and politics in dealing with security and governance, Garcia suggested, with the MILF leery of being accused of "surrender" by its constituency if it discussed issues of control too early in the talks. Timing was key, and Garcia made it clear he was willing to meet the MILF's needs by taking a step-by-step approach to the talks, working up to the most difficult topics while building trust and confidence through resolution of less contentious issues. Similarly, the sensitivity of these issues also meant releasing information to the public on the peace process through a step-by-step approach, so all the various groups would get acclimated, Garcia explained. He contended that NGOs and local populations would energetically support a negotiated agreement, but noted that the government's outreach efforts - particularly to business - needed to ramp up considerably.

#### Sophisticated Marketing Vital For Peace Pact

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15. (C) Equally sensitive was the issue of carrying out a plebiscite on the final agreement, Garcia stressed. Contrary to some of its public statements, according to Garcia, the MILF quietly acknowledged the need to hold a plebiscite

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despite the failure of a similar poll seeking approval of the 1996 final peace accord with the other major Muslim insurgency, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Still, this was a problematic requirement for the MILF, and the negotiators would have to approach it very cautiously. One mitigating factor was that a vote would only be required in the new territories to be added to the existing Muslim political entity, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Both sides would need to undertake a sophisticated marketing effort in order to succeed, not casting the vote as a win-or-lose situation and enlisting the aid of interested foreign governments, international organizations, NGOs and religious groups. The Philippine government also had political and economic benefits it could "dangle" in front of regional and local politicians to gain their support.

#### International Monitoring Team Expanded "In Principle"

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16. (C) One other outcome of the most recent Kuala Lumpur talks was an agreement to expand the scope of the international monitoring team (IMT), which monitors the MILF-government ceasefire, to the islands of the Sulu archipelago, Garcia confirmed, so that "another Basilan does not take place," referring to the July incident in which 10 Marines were killed and beheaded on the island. But the chief negotiator played down the significance of expanding the monitoring effort to Basilan, Jolo, Tawi-tawi and Palawan, where the MILF has few members, saying that in all likelihood the international monitors would continue to concentrate their efforts on central Mindanao, where the chance for conflict was higher. The MILF presence on Jolo, Tawi-tawi and Palawan was relatively small, according to Garcia, and thus IMT activity there was unlikely.

#### Second Opinion: Talks Proceeding Well

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17. (C) In a separate meeting November 27, former negotiator

Silvestre "Yong" Afable told DCM he believes government-MILF negotiations are proceeding well. He noted that current government negotiator Garcia played his cards close, and thus avoided needlessly stirring up cabinet members, which Afable laughingly said he sometimes had done. He believed the cabinet could successfully sell a peace plan to local leaders, once so directed by the President. Even the leading Muslim clan opposing the MILF - the Ampatuans - recognize that the politics of Mindanao are tilting toward peace, and that they will continue to lose political support if they do not adapt, Afable contended.

18. (C) Looking beyond the agreement on territory, Afable said it would be important for the international community to continue to press for more progress in 2008, before Philippine presidential campaigning begins in 2009. He believed there should be some form of documented international support for a peace agreement, as MILF Chairman Murad had suggested to DCM (ref B), which each side could use to shore up constituencies.

#### MNLF Less Focused But Still On Track

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19. (C) Contrasting the business-like MILF leadership, Afable opined that the leadership of the MNLF, centered on the island of Jolo, probably require support from Middle Eastern leaders to merge their own peace process with that of the MILF. Jailed MNLF leader Misuari had made many personal friends during his years in the Middle East, who cannot be easily dismissed, despite Misuari's unpredictable behavior. Afable noted there had been some discussion of a visit by the son of Libyan leader Qadhafi, who might be enticed to leave an emissary who could help guide the fractious MNLF into the current peace process.

110. (C) Comment: The government continues to make methodical progress toward peace with the MILF, while trying to draw the MNLF and local political leaders into the process. The territory agreement looks quite certain to be concluded in January, which would be a very important achievement. We will continue to press for more progress toward agreements on governance and security in 2008, while also seeking to broaden the constituency for a comprehensive peace agreement by engaging with concerned business, political and NGO leaders.

KENNEY